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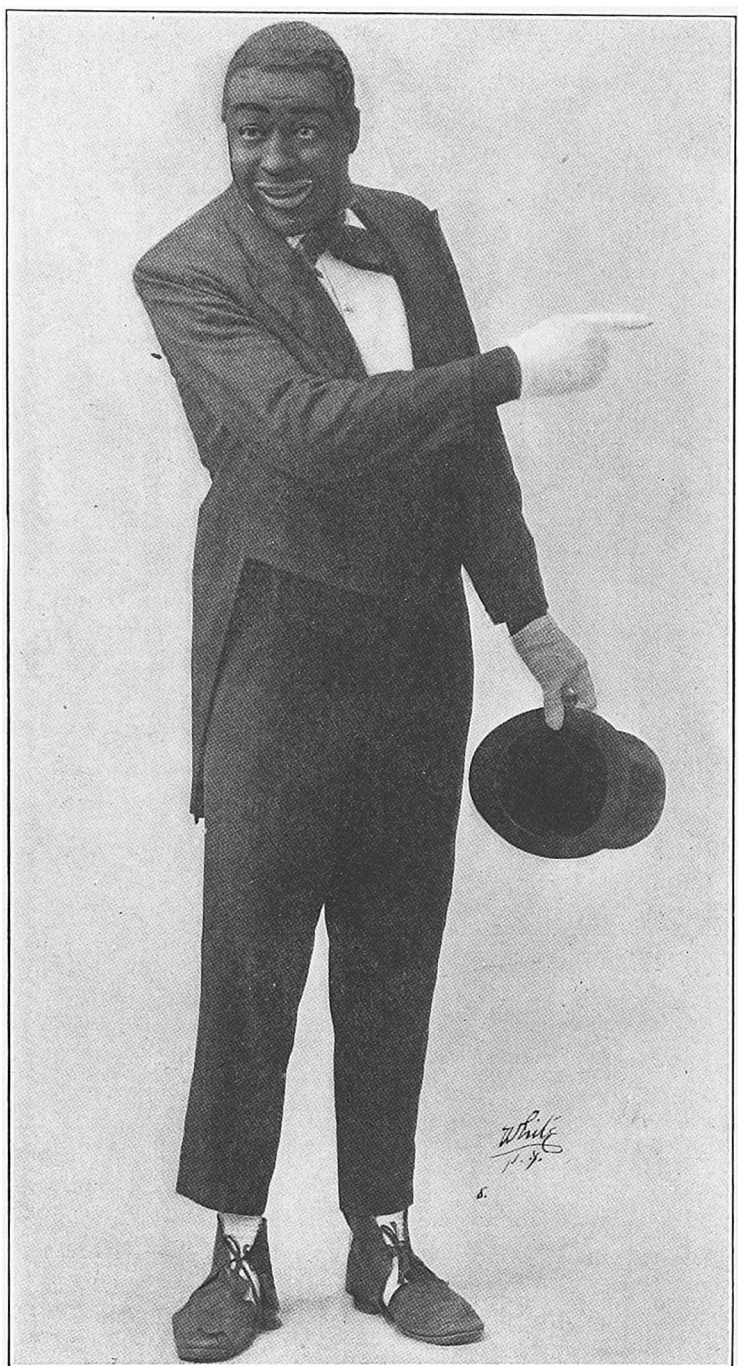
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[We must apologize for this picture of Bert Williams, but it is the best we could find in the city.]

Bert Williams

"I DON'T know how to talk about art. I don't know much about it. My job is to make 'em laugh. When they laugh I know it's going," Bert Williams says. He seems at all times unwilling to speak about his work, and has to be pressed a little, or else it is necessary to get him interested unawares. To my question, "Minstrels," he said, "are a thing of the past because there is no more minstrelsy. To cork your face and talk politics is not minstrelsy. There are no more men like 'Daddy Rice,' the originator of minstrelsy, but I think the art will be revived."

"What element," I asked him, "of your work are you most interested in?" "Character," he said. "I try to portray the darkey, the shiftless darkey, to the fullest extent, his fun, his philosophy. Show this shiftless darkey a book and he won't know what it's about. He can't read or write. But ask him a question and he'll answer it with a philosophy that has something in it. . . . There is nothing about the fellow I *work* that I don't know. I have studied him, his joys and sorrows. Contrast is vital. If I take up a lazy stevedore, I must study his movements—I have to, he's not in me—the way he walks, the way he crosses his legs, the way he leans up against a wall, one foot forward. I must imagine an idea and find out the way it would strike him, what he would do and think about it at any particular moment, before any particular audience in any particular frame of mind, and imagine how to 'put it over' to the audience. It's in a monkey to make people 'feel funny' because he's born that way, but it's not in me. To make people laugh I have to work it out carefully."

He reflected a moment, and said: "If I were free to do as I like, I would give both sides of the shiftless darkey, the pathos as well as the fun. But the public knows me for certain things—if I attempt anything outside of those things I'm not Bert Williams."

On being asked how he knew what the public wanted, he said: "I don't. Nobody knows what the public wants. It's a mystery."

We try one thing, and if it don't go we take it off and try another. I thought 'The Raven' would be a hit. I thought it was something worth while, something new. But it didn't go. Nearly everything I try I think is good, or partly good, only I'd rather give both sides. I often think of the old court jesters, how they used to make the guests weep before they made them laugh, but I have to do the thing of the moment because time is too short. The present show changes too quickly to lay out for a definite aim, to build up. One can't build up a character in a hurry."

Those of us who have followed Bert Williams' acting will, it seems to me, agree to the truth of this, of the fact that he has not given us all he might, and that the feeling of a vast reserve of power he certainly carries with him. He is the only actor I know who can express melancholy, if even for an instant, and then suddenly cause wild outbursts of laughter and applause in his audience. "One can't do what one wants," he repeated two or three times, without, however, wishing to emphasize the idea that he could be pathetic, if he would.

I have looked through the magazine indices and the general catalogue in the public library for literature on Bert Williams, but his name is not there, not even in Poole's index. The only reference I have found is a brief one in a book, "Monarchs of Minstrelsy," by Edward Le Roy Rice. He says, in part:

"This truly great performer made his first appearance with Lew Johnson's Minstrels twenty odd years ago; the remuneration was twelve dollars a week and 'cakes,' with an occasional chunk of pie," and that he was born in the Island of Nassau, British West Indies, from a Danish father and a Spanish-African mother."

On the origins of minstrelsy Rice is more explicit. He says, quoting an article written by R. P. Nevin in an Atlantic Monthly of 1867:

"Thirty-six years ago a young man (Daddy Rice), about twenty-five years of age, dressed in scrupulous keeping with the fashion of the time, might have been seen sauntering idly along one of the principal streets of Cincinnati. As he sauntered along, his attention was suddenly arrested by a voice ringing clear and full above the noises of the street, and giving utterance, in an unmistakable dialect, to the refrain of a song to this effect:

"Turn about an' wheel about an' do jis so,
An' ebery time I turn about I jump Jim Crow'

"Struck by the peculiarities of the performance, so unique in style, matter, and 'character' of delivery, the player listened on. Were not these elements—was the suggestion of the instant—which might admit of higher than mere street or stable-yard development? As a national or 'race' illustration, behind the footlights, might not Jim Crow and a black face tickle the fancy of pit and circle, as well as the 'Sprig of Shillahla' and a red nose? Out of the suggestion leaped the determination; and so it chanced that the casual hearing of a song trolled by a negro stage-driver, lolling lazily on the box of his vehicle, gave origin to a school of music destined to excel in popularity all others." The article proceeds to say how "the extraordinary apparition" of a black face on the stage produced an instant effect. "The crash of peanuts ceased in the pit, through the circles passed a murmur of the liveliest expectation," and the song:

"O, Jim Crow's come to town, as you all must know,
An' he wheel about, he turn about, he do jis so,
An' ebery time he wheel about he jump Jim Crow,'
was received with thunders of applause."

"About your dancing, . . ." I said. "I run more now than I dance," he smiled, "though often my dancing is the most important in expressing the character of a lazy darkey. It all depends on what phase of the character I want to express. Sometimes my voice is of uppermost importance, sometimes my song. I think the movements are *always* important. I don't believe there are any limitations to what can be expressed through this medium. I'd like to take a character and build it up, giving both sides, to weld it together and 'put it over' as one whole, but I never had an opportunity to try it out. I do only comic things."

I asked, "Do you think the idea is as important as the way it is 'put over'?" "There are not many ideas in existence," he said; "the idea becomes important when you decide to put it over. On the stage, we judge of the success of a piece by the applause and by the box-office receipts. The newspapers often give us a hint of the public's mind."

In the course of our talk he touched on the race question:

"When a man has no pigment in his skin it's hard. Just think

what I have to do to 'git by.' The Caucasian believes every colored man is a 'coon,' that they are all alike, that they should not live in a modern way. This is a mistake. We have as many differences as the white man and no one characteristic covers us all. Do you think because I have an African strain in me, that I ought to stick a feather in my hair and go out there and shoot up things?" he said, pointing at the window.

His interest in his work is constant. "I like to see how the other fellow works," he said, referring to the fact that he makes a round of the theatres on Sundays.

One phase of Bert Williams' acting that depicts him as a true artist is his "nice" exaggeration; his sleeves are too short, his shoes too big, but not too short or too big. Imagination, and taste, govern his make-up. It is a misconception of what is comical to appear on the stage in a pair of well-fitting boots, if one is a clown, but it is a tedious misconception, and makes for a tedious evening, to appear in shoes a yard too long. There is a nice point between which it requires subtlety to gauge, and which, when rightly gauged, proves the man a comedian sensitive to comic values instead of a minor criminal. From a humorous point of view, there can be power in tangoing as if you were endeavoring your best to be graceful, but the least exaggeration here defeats its own ends more or less in the painful manner that "rapid-fire" dialogue does. Humor is deep.

It is by this element of subtlety that Bert Williams shows an original mind; subtlety of costume, of manner, of voice, of movement especially,—even his feet are subtle sometimes, an unobtrusive commentary on what is going on over the footlights. It is the life-spreading touch in all his work.

He can linger over and slowly leave the syncopated notes with an expression of time which it is impossible to indicate in the notes themselves. I have never seen him dance any of the quick, choppy ragtime tunes; in fact, he is mostly unhappy on the stage, his humor seemingly unaimed at, as if welling up out of an incurable melancholy; in the song, "Nobody," he slowly twirls and untwirls himself in languorous contortions, his profound bass—overcast with gloom and fit for dirges—all the while unrolling the curious grievance which is the subject of that piece, till gradually it all acquires a quality nearer to dreams, perhaps, than to reality. A raven could

not be more dismal, yet the audience roars with laughter. Laughter of this sort one likes to remember.

"The movements are always important." Movement is his instrument, and he uses it to play on, to express the odd and intimate traits which are himself. The leading actors along Broadway, the greater part of them, "conform" to such a point that it becomes afflictive; they bring to the stage a mass of technical difficulties mastered more or less vaguely, a certain tradition, a vague one on this side of the water, and of the character they are to represent—as a rule they bring only the skeleton. They never express themselves and we do not know them, we get to know only this conformity,—as one side, one general trait—to know it so thoroughly that often we are even able to anticipate their gestures. One involuntarily classifies them and there the matter ends; they gradually blur and merge with a crowd of others,—perhaps a harmful crowd for the memory. The point is, Bert Williams brings his imagination to the stage—always a rare thing for an actor to do—and one likes to retain him, a living image.

J. B.



In an interview published in "The Referee," Clarence Taggie Chen, the game little 126-pound Chinese boxer, who has won his way in Australia, says of himself: "The Referee' has always praised me, but really, I don't deserve it. I am not much of a fighter, and one paper says Rud Kee always was my master. My first battle was with Will Hughes. We stood toe to toe and smashed. I got him in the fifth, but he deserved as much credit as I did. He was gamer than I was, I think. All my opponents have been real gentlemen. I have not received a decent hard punch—one that dazed me—yet, but I hope my opponents do not think I belittle them when I say this. I am going to the United States. I am not going to say, when I get there, I am champion of so-and-so country. I will start from the bottom rung and I think I can make some of the second raters travel over the short courses over there."